

[Maria Gonzales—Florida Squatter]

26019

2700 words

Mrs. Texas Morgan

Venus, Florida

12/7/38

Barbara Berry Darsey [MARLA GONSALES?]

FLORIDA [SQUATTER?]

Maria came across the yard with an apron full of vegetables which she dumped upon the back steps; them, as several little pigs and a few chickens came forward to investigate, she called to one of the group of five or six children following at her heels: "Teeny, take them collards an turnips right a to the kitchen."

Dusting her hands upon her apron she [?] to the gate which was firmly fastened with several staands of barbed wire and proceeded to open it. "Won't you come in," she said shyly, "my house ain't very tidy and you must scuse the looks of things. Seems like I'm so busy all the time with my garden an the younguns, I don't have time to clean up much."

We then went up the steps and across the rickety porch into the front room where we stood and talked for a while. "Them chairs ain't very strong, but you can set on this bed. I know this spread looks kinder dirty for the younguns will waller on it."

Maria stated that she was born in Florida in a nearby county, but was was not sure whether it was Hardee or De Soto, about forty-two years ago. She thought she might be

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of Spanish lineage but was not sure of that as she had never heard her parents discuss their ancestry, and all of her grand-parents died before she was born. "Sometimes people ask me if I am Spanish because I am so dark of skin an have such big dark eyes, they always tell me, but I don't know, an what difference would it make anyway, I'd just be right on living like I am now.

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"I was the fifth of seven chillerns, and was raised on a farm and I learnt to do most all the kinds of farm work just as good as a man could. I never went to school much for I didn't like it and my Pa he wanted me to work on the farm most of the time.

"John and I got married about twenty years ago and my oldest boy, Jim, he's nineteen now. John came here from a place called Carloina. No ma'am, I don't know if it was North or South. Carolina is all I ever heard him say. He was a farmer too and we started in to farm on a little patch of my Pa's farm but we didn't do so well.

"Seemed like John just didn't take to the ways here and he was kinda queer and never would listen to nobody. My family didn't like it much the way he acted but we stayed on there about two years, then John got real mad with my Pa and he moved me over here only we lived way out in the woods near a swamp then. I didn't mind living out there, I liked it for there didn't nobody bother us, we lived so far out. After you left the hard road you had to travel the grade for a long ways and then walk through a patch of woods for nigh on a mile, so didn't many people come to visit us. I never was much to visit anyway, seems like."

Maria looked around her little rude [poorly?] furnished room and signed. "This here little house it's much better than what we had out younder. John, he always was queer and he said we didn't need no house so he built us a shelter of palmette leaves and put a floor in it and we lived there. After a while he fenced it all round and got some pigs and chickens and we had em all right there with us. Once a man said he would give John lumber for a

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house but that made John awful mad and 3 he wouldn't have it. He said he had always lived just like we was then and he didn't want to change."

A look of fear came into her dark eyes as she peered about the room. "We lived there for a long long time and it hasn't been but most four years we been a livin here now. John kinder went out his head and took his shotgun and said he was agoin to kill us all, so I got the younguns together—that littler one was just a tiny baby then—an we ran into the woods and hid from him all day. We could hear him a-rantin and a-cussin and sometimes a-sigin gospel songs and we sure was seared. Come sundown we made our way to a neighbor on another farm about seven miles off an we all stayed there for the night. The next day we got to town and folks there looked after us. They got Jim a place to work on a poultry farm an they fixed up this old place for us and here we been ever since."

Maria paused as if looking back to the shelter in the swamp that was her home for so long. "Most of these younguns was born way out there. I never had no doctor tend me, just a nigger woman most the time, but there was times when there wasn't no one there with me but John. When he went crazy I had to grab the little baby out the bed and run with it in my arms."

She went on to say that the family had never had much medical care. While they were "on the Relief" a nurse went to see her and then came again and said the whole family must be treated for worms. That made John mad too but the nurse was firm and even came out to give the treatments.

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Then John's eyes got so bad he could hardly see to work so they were treated and glasses fitted. The children are rarely ill and castor oil is about all they ever took.

"John went an lost his mind over thinkin too much about religion. He got so he wouldn't work even in the garden and would just set out under a tree an worry whether or not he was saved. He didn't go to church much. [Way?] out [there?] it is too far to walk. Now I go

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to church some when I can and I take all the younguns along. Some times we walk the grade; other times somebody comes and picks us up and carries us to town. Jim he gives to the church and sometimes he gives the younguns pennies to put in the basket just like the other chillens do an he always gives me a dime to take. I don't know what the church does with all that money. The preacher he must be powerful rich if they give it all to him. But anyway they always ask us for it. I never know just what the preacher is sayin, he talks too fast but I like to watch him an I such loves to hear the singin. I have a bible but I don't read much on account of my eyes ain't so good, but I tries to git the younguns to read it sometimes. It's kinder hard for me to read anyway cause I never went to school much cause I didn't like to go and would rather do farm work. What good is schoolin for a woman anyway? They get on just well.

"I want my younguns to learn readin and writin bettern I did. They might need it sometime but I don't see [?] use much in more than that. These younguns always tryin to tell me about some fancy learnin they get 5 at the school-house, but I don't see no use in it. John, he could read and write real well and figger some too and there he is now away out yonder by hisself. What good did it do him?

"When John run us off we didn't have no money, but we never had hardly none anyway. When Jim got work at the chicken farm he got fifty cents a day an he give it all to me. How he makes a dollar an a quarter a day [but he?] [?] to keep some of it. He's growin up now, you know, and got girls on his mind. He had to stay right at the farm all the time at first to tend the [biddies] at night an start lights so the hens could get up early and eat before sunup. Now he don't have to work that hard but he don't get home much. Sometimes he comes on Saturday an stays over Sunday, but most likely he just comes a little while on Sunday afternoon. He gits his board an we git some cracked eggs an sometimes a chicken an it helps a lot.

"I do farm work [to?] an so do my oldest girls. They don't like to go to school anymore an I guess they got enough schoolin anyway. When we came to this place I used to carry the

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baby—that little one there—in my arms with that nex one a-tuggin along, holding mostly to my skirt or hand, an well sometimes five mile to neighbors to work. Sometimes before we got there I had to carry both these younguns. Then I did farm work, whatever they told me to do, sometimes I hoed corn, or picked squash an beans, or shelled beans for market. I got my dinner and somethin to carry home to the other younguns who be at school then, an some vegetables. We never was much to eat vegetables expect cabbage or collards cooked with side meat, but sometimes we got so hungry an we didn't have nothin but vegetables so that learned us to eat most all kinds, 6 like beans an such.”

She paused as if recalling something and then said: “One time when John was on the Relief a woman came out from the big town to tell us all what to eat and how to cook it. I didn't go to the meetin, but I heard about it. What's the use of that? Life is just life, an vegetables just grow an we all can cook them. Seems like that woman didn't want us to boil our greens with lots of side meat for a long time! Why they ain't fitten to eat if en you don't cook them thataway! And she said the flour dough fried bread wasn't fitten to eat. I guess she never tasted none of it. When it's fried in hog fat they just ain't nothin any better.”

“Another time they wanted to give us clothes for the younguns an us too and lunches for the younguns goin to school. That made John awful mad and he wouldn't take none of it. He said he knowed it were a trap of some kind an he would sure have to pay for it all sometime, or else go to jail an he always was fraid of jail.” Maria paused, shook her head sadly, and a far-a-way look came into her large expressive eyes: “They was others took all them things an they did have such purty clothes an they never had to pay for them or go to jail neither.”

She then looked lovingly at her family clustered about her. “Never seems to me that I got a lot of younguns. Only eight. I know some folks got a dosen or more. Guess I'd a had three-four more [?] this time if John hadn't run us off like he did. I have heard tell of some folks not havin younguns when they oughter. That's real sinful, I think an it's agin nature too, just

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like takin all that medicine that time the nurse made us do. The Lord He don't want us to do all them things; it ain't right.

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Tis kinder hard some times gittin enough food an clothes for all my younguns. The church, it wanted to help us once but I'm kinder like John thataway, I just don't like for people to give me things less I know em real well an then I want to work for em. Jim's money don't go so far. Things do cost a awful lot these here days, but people don' have more younguns than they should and they just get to take their share."

Mention of polities and voting brought a blank stare, and then: "Jim, he wants to vote, whatever that means. I don't understand nothin about that and don't want to. It ain't for women anyway an the lesser we knows about it the better off we is. I get enough to do tendin my younguns an my garden an workin for other farmers thout messin up in votin." Maria's eyes fairly snapped in the first real emotion she had [evinced?].

We talked of town and city life and she stated; "Jim, he talks some of movin to the city but I won't go. I like this life now we got used to it. I guess it's better here than livin [way?] out yonder in the swamp, though I ain't never thought much about it. But livin in the city, folks pester you too much. More comes here to see me than what they did when we lived out yonder but I don't go to see them less I have work to do there. I don't want folks a-comin in and a-tellin me what to do, how to run my house, an tend my younguns. This way suits me an it's my life. Out here we don't have much sickness neither like I hear tell they have in town. [Seems?] like someone is alway sick there. Sometimes one of my younguns has the colic an I give him plenty of castor oil and he soon gits 8 well. If he [has?] a [tooth?] hurtin I let him pack [snuff?] round it [?] it [will?] stop [?] real soon. [Snuff's?] good for ear ache too. If you blow it [down?] in the ear, it don't feel so good at first but soon helps. I don't want no change. [?] in from [?] yonder was enough an I be satisfied with my [way?] of livin. I don't see why folks always go to [trompin?] round from place to place. Why don't they git a place and stay there?"

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Several of the smaller children had gone out to the yard and were [playing?] ball. maria gazed at them [?] and said: “[John?], he never did let the children play not even in the clearin at the [swamp?]. He said when they had [time?] they should set an think and [figger?] if they was saved or not. [?] they don't take much to that. I guess maybe it'll come later with them. [Seems?] like they just [?] to have a little fun an I let em play lots and don't pester em all the time. They is good younguns as any you will find an I let the two girls go to little parties sometimes. I always make em promise not to dance for that sure is the devil's work. Of course i ain't got much say over Jim now, but I always pester him about not dancin too.

[Maria?] paused and seemed in deep thought for some [seconds?], then [sighed?] and said: “John, he came [here?] once a long time ago and tried to git us to go back out yonder to the swamp with him but I wouldn't go. I was scared of the look in his eyes, kinder red, like [?] he was awful mad about [something?]. The town folks they told him if he pestered me again they would put him in jail an I guess [that?] scared him pretty bad for he [?] pestered me [no?] more and I ain't seen him for a long while now but sometimes he talks to the [younguns?] in town.”